

Ray Peat's Newsletter

*Most learning isn't the result of instruction. It's rather the result of participation
in an environment full of meaning . Ivan Illich*

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Education, a developmental process, confronts absolutism

Education has been associated with freedom for a long time. In ancient Greece, “liberal arts” referred to the knowledge that was appropriate for the full development of free citizens; technical training provided the useful knowledge needed by slaves. In more recent times, knowledge of the sciences has been accepted as part of the education of the upper classes, and common people have come to see the liberating effects of a broad education. Recognizing the liberating effects of literacy, several southern states outlawed the education of slaves. Something analogous to this attitude exists in the advocates of “efficiency” in education, who argue that segregating (“tracking”) according to ability, even dividing students into vocational and academic courses, makes education more effective, at lower cost.

Politicians, university presidents, and public school superintendents, committed to efficiency, often give lip service to the idea of helping students to develop their full potential, encouraging Socratic methods and focus on the students’ needs, and most public school teachers believe that is what they are doing—or trying to do, when they aren’t just preparing their students to take one of the eight annual standardized achievement tests that are required. Most university teachers, in my experience, believe that their job is to facilitate the transfer of a certain body of knowledge into their students’ minds, and consider their few colleagues with other views to be irresponsible. In practice, what is foremost in their understanding of the

curriculum is their confidence in its reality, rather than a suspicion that it might not be quite appropriate for this generation of learners.

Representatives of the most powerful people in the world, typified by Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum, WEF, are saying that it is urgent to radically change education, to improve it (again with lip service to all the best traditional human values), and that the current pandemic provides the opportunity for these sudden changes. In the US, the closing of schools and universities caused an immediate shift to obligatory use of the internet for classes. Some schools have announced that only certain classes, compatible with “social distancing,” will be taught in classrooms in the fall.

For Blake, the imposition of “mind-forg'd manacles” by governments, churches, and schools was the essential problem, which was to be resolved by mental combat, a refusal to accept unexamined opinion.

In May, 2019, Eric Schmidt, chairman if the secretive National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, former chairman of the Defense Innovation Board, and until recently CEO and chairman of Google and still a major share-holder and advisor there, **revealed some of the commission’s recommendations**, explaining the urgency of shutting down the present economy, to force rapid digital automation in everything—education, medicine, production

and shopping, communication and travel. A year later, on May 8, 2020, Governor Cuomo announced that Schmidt would be in charge of “reimagining” New York’s educational system, medical system, and economy. Two days earlier, in announcing a partnership with the Gates Foundation to create a “smarter education system,” Cuomo implied that it would help the state to dispense with “. . . all these buildings, all these physical classrooms . . .” (Klein, 2020).

“We must know all the facts and hear all the alternatives and listen to all the criticisms.” John F Kennedy

The present ruling “philosophy” of education is preventing people in the profession from organizing meaningful resistance to these changes that are being imposed. The ideas of both John Dewey and Jean Piaget regarding the nature of human development incorporated Hegel’s idea of movement toward a final, mature, completed state, rather than developing a continually stronger and stronger ability to intentionally transform the self and its interactions with its surroundings.

If the teacher personally has a critical attitude toward the world of experience, that will spontaneously lead to a critical pedagogy, in which any topic can only be presented as something with its own developmental history.

The issue of freedom in education has been developing for hundreds of years in association with the ideas of democracy and political freedom. J. J. Rousseau’s work developed the implications of replacing the doctrine of Original Sin with belief in the innate goodness of all beings: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.” If allowed to grow up without the deforming influences of the cruel, corrupt commercial society, people would be able to make the necessary compromises needed to participate in a rational society. Despite his clear advocacy, in his book on education, *Emile*, of compromising the fullness of humanity in favor of developing good citizens, the politically dangerous consequences of holding his new view on the nature of mind and of

being were obvious, and the book was immediately (1762) banned, but its influence spread quickly in those pre-revolutionary years.

For Rousseau, developing freely according to nature must begin at birth; he rejected the traditional practice of swaddling, binding the infant to prevent movement of arms and legs, and he advocated breast feeding: “. . . let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature’s sentiments will be awakened in every heart, the state will be repeopled.”

Rousseau’s ideas contributed to the Romantic Movement in the arts, and probably contributed to the growing resistance to mechanistic materialism in science, such as in Goethe’s explorations in botany.

In the 1790s, reflecting Rousseau’s influence, William Godwin in England believed that a new kind of education that respects the child’s spontaneous interests was necessary to make a new kind of state possible, a minimal state that respected its citizens. In this same period, William Blake agreed with Rousseau and Godwin on the need to create a new kind of society, but he strongly disagreed with Rousseau’s theory of nature, mind, and education.

For Blake, a constantly critical awareness was part of the process of being conscious in a living universe.

Blake saw the influence of Deism in Rousseau’s thoughts: A failure to question the Cartesian doctrine of a nature consisting of inert matter; knowledge as the result of a passive empiricism; a created, rather than creative, nature. For Blake, everything in nature is alive, interactive, ongoing, and the perceiving person is an “intellectual fountain,” always moving into new experiences. “The bounded is loathed by its possessor, The same dull round even of a universe would soon become a mill with complicated wheels.” In 1809, Blake commented on those holding the ruling ideology: “. . . who being weakly organized themselves, cannot see either miracle or prodigy: all is to them a dull round of probabilities and possibilities.”

Rousseau saw even free and respectful education as requiring compromises, narrowing development, in preparation for citizenship. **For Blake, the imposition of “mind-forg'd manacles” by governments, churches, and schools was the essential problem, which was to be resolved by mental combat, a refusal to accept unexamined opinion.** Compromise would result in the oppression experienced by the passive clod, in “The Clod and the Pebble.” **For Blake, a constantly critical awareness was part of the process of being conscious in a living universe.**

The growth of technology led to the extension of the trade school mentality into the universities in the 19th century.

It would be more than 100 years after the death of Blake, Godwin, and Goethe before the implications of a critical mind in an infinite world would be explicitly applied to education theory by Lev Vygotsky, Myles Horton, Paolo Freire, and Ivan Illich. During that interim, governments became aware of the threat of any intellectual freedom in schools, and England began using the ideas of Utilitarianism to promote “educational efficiency,” basing funding of schools on their ranking by standardized tests. Pragmatism in the 20th century in the US didn’t differ dangerously from Utilitarianism, and has been assimilated into the arguments for efficiency and cheapness of schooling.

The growth of technology led to the extension of the trade school mentality into the universities in the 19th century. John Henry Newman, as founding rector of a new catholic university, dissented from those pressures as well as the pressure to function as a seminary, saying that the university “. . . contemplates neither moral impression nor mechanical production; it professes to exercise the mind neither in art nor in duty; its function is intellectual culture” Dissent of that sort has tended, in the US, to become little more than a shift from a utilitarian or religious curriculum to a “Great Books” curriculum, rather than supporting a critical attitude of evaluating the culture itself, and its curriculums—an attitude

based on a radically different perception of the nature of mind and of being and becoming.

In the 1950s, arguing that there wasn’t enough “discipline” in the public schools, there were renewed attempts to make schools more “efficient and productive,” and the “psychologist” B.F. Skinner, who explicitly said that the idea of “mind” must be removed from the science of behavior, began promoting the idea that education should be based on his concept of “operant conditioning,” with programmed instruction that was to be administered by a machine (Skinner, 1954; 1961). Skinner’s concept of behavior and learning as mindless was realized in the programmed machine learning that considered increasing restriction and rigidity of behavioral responses to be the goal of learning. The machines were said to be based on Socratic principles of learning—as if neither Socrates nor his students needed a mind. Schools began applying these methods widely in the 1960s, and their effect was to increase the irritation and resentment of students.

“The machine-like behavior of people chained to electronics constitutes a degradation of their well-being and of their dignity which, for most people in the long run, becomes intolerable.” Ivan Illich

Some teachers who have recognized that obligation is incompatible with full mental functioning have refused to grade their students, and have found that they did better work than graded students. A.S. Neill, in his school Summerhill, made classes available, but didn’t require attendance. Performance of their graduating students, including on university entrance exams, compared favorably with students from conventional schools. Some universities have adopted extensive use of pass/fail grading, replacing the conventional letter grade ranking, recognizing that grades are anti-educational. Students who have received good grades may be shocked when they realize that they haven’t understood some basic concepts in the courses they “excelled” in.

As recently as the 1960s, when Horton's and Freire's ideas (education to oppose oppression) were attracting attention, there was some discussion in universities of the potential of education to change the values of students, leading to social change. It was understood that there were social problems that could be changed, and that education could help—an understanding that had become widespread since the publication of Émile. But now, in recent years, the idea of change has been reversed—it is the teachers and the culture of the universities that are to be changed by society's "stakeholders," by the needs of "the economy," to remove the "inefficiency" that remains.

The campaign to privatize education accelerated in the 1980s along with neoliberalism, deregulation, and privatizing everything except the military. A new concept of citizenship was being created, as expressed by Margaret Thatcher: "There is no such thing as society." Funding for public universities was being reduced, and they began forming "partnerships" with corporations and concentrating on fundraising.

Paolo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed helped the poorest Brazilians to become literate in the full sense of the word, and it can help middle class Americans to develop the same reality seeking attitude.

In the '90s, one University of Oregon president announced that "football is central to the university's mission," and the following president proposed privatizing the university, while concentrating on football as a source of income and to attract big donors, specifically Nike. The university left the state system, to become an independent corporation, meaning that its financial dealings aren't open to the public. It became a marketing and public relations tool for Nike. Similar things tend to happen with charter schools. The Gates foundation sponsored a "partnership" of charter and public schools, financed mostly by taxes that cost a billion dollars over seven years. A study sponsored by the Rand Corporation concluded that it failed to improve education, and some analysts

say it made things worse, but the Gates foundation said it "drove change" in the country and they plan to do it again.

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These changes have made "public" education vastly more expensive for students (in real dollars, tuition at Oregon universities is 8 times higher than when I was in college), and they coincide with the concentration of wealth and power. **The pandemic, which has harmed most people, has been very good for the oligarchs.** Since the March 18 beginning of the lockdowns, until July 23, the wealth of US billionaires has increased 25.6%, more than \$755 billion (Collins, et al. Institute for Policy Studies).

To respond to this crisis, Klaus Schwab, founder and chairman of the World Economic Forum, says that the virus will definitely return, and that the worst depression since the 1930s is likely to begin, so unprecedented changes must be made. **"To achieve a better outcome, the world must act jointly and swiftly to revamp all aspects of our societies and economies, from education to social contracts and working conditions. Every country, from the United States to China, must participate, and every industry, from oil and gas to tech, must be transformed. In short, we need a "Great Reset" of capitalism."** (Schwab, 2020; COVID Action Platform).

Increasing efficiency, higher performance, and lower cost are the same educational goals they have been seeking, but what they have in mind is a radical shift to automation. The argument is being made that the best courses will be recorded to make them available, efficiently and profitably, to the greatest number of students. Then, they argue that the introduction of virtual reality will make the "best experiences" available to even the poorest students—but designing the best virtual reality programs will become more and more

expensive, so the process must become more and more centralized. Closing schools and firing teachers will increase educational efficiency, as well as profitability, and will facilitate the production of uniformity and controllability in the population.

One of the methods of controlling the population, especially in the US, has been to convince the great majority of the population that they belong to the “middle class,” and that they rank higher on the economic scale than they really do. In 1960, in a graduate seminar, I was shocked when the professor interrupted me to inform me that “there are no classes in the United States,” and so my presentation wasn’t relevant to American literature. Everyone, they say, belongs to the middle class, there is no ruling class, and poverty is a personal, not a public issue. If there are no classes, how could oppression exist?

The lockdown of the mental world seems to be succeeding in containing the virus of critical thinking. This is increasing the likelihood that the “Great Reset” will succeed.

Suddenly, many people are discovering that their conditions are oppressive, though they aren’t able to understand the causes, other than the “bat virus” that’s causing a pandemic. The existing educational systems aren’t going to help them to understand their place in the world, but that is the purpose of real education.

Myles Horton’s Highlander School wasn’t just a place for people like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King; its critical, reality seeking, attitude was appropriate for anyone, anywhere. Paolo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed helped the poorest Brazilians to become literate in the full sense of the word, and it can help middle class Americans to develop the same reality seeking attitude.

In the 1960s, Ivan Illich moved to Cuernavaca, Mexico, and created a school where missionaries could quickly learn Spanish, but the language instruction was combined with learning about the culture they would be working in, and an examination of their own culture and motives for doing the

work; many of the students learned that they wouldn’t be able to help anyone unless they understood what these people wanted and needed. Some of his students weren’t able to reconsider their belief that they were there simply to bring a superior culture to people in an inferior culture. The assumptions of programmed instruction, and of the top-down educational “reformers,” are similar to those of the culturally blind priests who couldn’t accept Illich’s methods—the program’s, the curriculum’s, existence represents the consensus of the best authorities, and criticism reduces efficiency.

Some education, distinct from training, has been occurring in schools and universities, when individual teachers were able to communicate that their function was to critically evaluate the subject matter of the course, and that it was a process, involving the students, whose outcome wasn’t quite predictable. Those individuals won’t have a place in the programmed instruction that is being planned and imposed.

The first step toward building a new civilization in which education fosters the free and full development of human beings has to be to stop this mad rush of governments and their masters toward isolation and standardization of everything in the culture and economy.

The lockdown of the mental world seems to be succeeding in containing the virus of critical thinking. This is increasing the likelihood that the Great Reset will succeed. With its success, the Qualified people might achieve their dream of eternal life in a technological paradise (if necessary, in orbit around a dead Earth); all their imagined scenarios include artificial intelligence as the survival factor.

Accepting their assumptions, the possible outcomes are as predictable as the entropic death of the universe; however, if their assumptions about the nature of life, mind, and the universe are wrong, their plans and expectations are wrong. Sensing that their arbitrary assumptions are indefensible, they must prevent criticism.

Parents, regardless of the availability of schooling, have an opportunity to promote critical learning in their children, by asking

“where is the science?” to support the abrogation of civil rights—where is the science to support staying home, wearing a mask, getting vaccinated? Where is the science to show the safety and efficacy of vaccines? Those questions will lead to more questions about the relative value of consensus, authority, data, logical consistency, and ulterior motives. **Anyone can become a spreader, or even a super-spreader, of the virus of critical thinking.**

The first step toward building a new civilization in which education fosters the free and full development of human beings has to be to stop this mad rush of governments and their masters toward isolation and standardization of everything in the culture and economy.

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